

WAUKEGAN — The finish line for a complete environmental clean-up of Waukegan Harbor might still be too distant to see, but the various officials who hope to make it happen said Wednesday that they see a possible starting line on the horizon.

Mayor Richard Hyde, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, and Col. Gary Johnson of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were among those gathered at the Waukegan Yacht Club to stress the importance of a July 2007 deadline to apply for federal funds under the Great Lakes Legacy Act.

"It's going to take a combination of federal, local and state participants to make this happen," said Johnson, whose Corps dredges the harbor's approach channels annually to keep shipping lanes open but doesn't have the funds to tackle an estimated 1,200 pounds of carcinogenic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in the inner harbor.

That final clean-up would require an estimated \$35 million in funds, and officials say about \$23 million of that could be secured through the Great Lakes Legacy program. The 2004 federal grant effort was designed to provide \$270 million over five years to clean up environmental Areas of Concern on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes. Waukegan Harbor is one of 43 sites in the U.S. and Canada currently on the list.

With 26 of those areas in the U.S. alone, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region V acting Administrator Bharat Mathur said advocates for Waukegan Harbor must "demonstrate strong stakeholder support" in competing for the dollars.

"We believe in this project because it's the right thing to do. We have a strong desire to see the harbor cleaned up and de-listed as an Area of Concern," Mathur said. "(But) we do have a very limited window of opportunity."

Mathur added that among the components of the Legacy Act application process is "to score and rank the proposals, because we do have a lot of applications."

In the first fiscal year of the plan, 14 sites requested a total of \$80 million in grants, when only \$10 million was available. The budgeted amount subsequently increased to \$45 million for the 2005 fiscal year, with future amounts to be determined.

Todd Goeks of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said securing a grant is critical because "the dredging of this harbor is long overdue."

"I think this is a major step in our collective realization of this project," Goeks said. "We need to make sure the harbor is cleaned up once and for all."

The existence of known pollutants in Waukegan Harbor is witnessing a milestone this year, according to Cameron Davis of the Alliance for the Great Lakes, who noted that contaminants were first discovered in 1976.

"There's an enormous sense of urgency to get things done," Davis said. "Here we are at the 30th anniversary (and) we need to make sure we don't go another 10 to 12 years."

Along with the hoped-for federal dollars, an estimated \$12 million in state, county and local funds is projected for the effort. City officials said that any public funding could be augmented by contributions from existing industries along the harbor.

According to Waukegan Director of Governmental Services Ray Vukovich, National Gypsum Co. and the LaFarge Corp. have been meeting with city and Waukegan Port District officials on the matter, and he added that "we'd like to set more places at the table."

Meanwhile, Johnson said that a \$2.6 million project to dredge PCBs from a portion of the outer harbor could be completed by next summer. Federal funds for that work were secured for the coming fiscal year, and Johnson said he's hoping to employ "an aggressive time line" for the dredging.

"If we don't do an aggressive timeline, we'll be sitting here three years from now asking the same questions," Johnson said. The dredging has been described as a first step in tackling the PCBs remaining after a harbor cleanup in the early 1990s.

Also in and around the lakefront, work is under way on the \$1.4 million replacement and lowering of a water main that runs beneath the harbor from the municipal water plant.

Clayton Street west of the yacht club was closed earlier this week to allow crews to dig up the pavement and install a portion of the new main. Lakefront traffic is being detoured south on Pershing Road to Madison Street.

Vukovich said Clayton, which handles traffic to and from both the harbor and the municipal beach, should be re-opened in time for Memorial Day weekend.

To the north, where work is nearly complete on a clean-up of the former coke plant site on Seahorse Drive, Hyde said the city will be seeking requests for development proposals "next week or the first part of May."

"It's environmentally clean," Hyde said of the 40-acre site, which was cleared of PCBs and other contaminants by past industrial owners. "There's a little groundwater they're still working on, but right now, that (land) can be built on."

Hyde also said that the city continues to field proposals for the vacant Outboard Marine Corp. headquarters north of the coke plant, with one interested party scheduled to visit the 1.7 million-square-foot city-owned building on Wednesday.

While declining to elaborate on the mayor's OMC comments specifically, Vukovich said that "people come in all the time to check out that property. It's a cat-and-mouse game."

Generally speaking, Vukovich said proposals have centered on boat storage and light industry,

and "we try to direct them toward what the master plan called for down there, (which) was residential and recreation."

The city paid \$130 to take possession of the building and surrounding land last summer. Any development at the OMC site would have to deal with contaminants in the soil and groundwater, including the industrial solvent trichloroethylene (TCE).

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